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MILEPOST

The Package Sells the Product

Packaging has its Mona Lisas. That famous Kleenex box was originally designed more than 30 years ago. The Coca-Cola bottle, which is so familiar worldwide that it has trademark status, made its appearance during World War I. Until recent years, however, the package to the average businessman was a box, bottle, bag, or tube that was O.K. as long as it didn't leak.

With the advent of super-sized retail outlets and self-service, and the new product explosion of the 1950s, packaging began to achieve status as a sales tool. How could a housewife choose between a dozen grocery products on the shelf, each extravagantly advertised but all more or less alike? More and more often the answer given was the package—the silent salesman at the point of sale, as the cliché goes. Brave marketers proved it. Philip Morris introduced Marlboro cigarettes in a flip-top box in 1955, tied the package tightly to advertising and promotion, and the brand took off. Hudson Tissues, pitted against Kleenex, came up with the idea of a removable plastic sleeve that carried all labels and advertising copy and could be slipped off to leave a pretty dispenser box. (Eventually, Kleenex turned in the old box for a designer package, too.)

Anheuser-Busch hired high-priced designer Jerome Gould to create a package that could fight the invading European brews. The result in 1961 was the elegant Michelob bottle, which has since had imitators in products from shampoo to salad oil.

By then, of course, everyone agreed that good-looking packages sell goods. A designer could talk on such esoteric topics as human perception of shape and size and the sex-relatedness of color and get a hearing in almost any marketing department.

But the big word was convenience.

In the 1960s, technological progress and a veritable materials explosion gave marketers a chance to compete for consumers by going after their growing appetite for convenience. The coffee industry, after resisting change for years, finally scrapped the unpopular key-opening can in 1964, replacing it with one that opens with a can opener and recloses with a plastic lid. Plastic alone spawned great numbers of new packages, from squeeze-bag pie crusts to transparent egg cartons.

"The package is the product" became a meaningful phrase as innovations such as cartridge-loading cameras, boil-in-bag foods, and briquets that burn up in their box made it impossible to say exactly where product ends and package begins.

Today, U.S. manufacturers spend upwards of \$17 billion a year on packaging materials, an amount that is multiplied by the conversion and finishing costs before the package goes to market.

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Cigarette Is Burnett's Baby

To the Editor: I heard the most hilarious rumor of the year this past Saturday night at a party full of Chicago advertising people. The word seems to be that a certain New York agency is responsible for the creative work of the Virginia Slims campaign.

My only interest is as a loyal Burnett person. The campaign is entirely a product of Burnett creative people. It is selling cigarettes faster than the certain New York agency ever did. But isn't it amazing how people are willing to believe all good things of people who are not only good but pretty?

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